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UNITED NATIONS RELIEF AND WORKS AGENCY FOR PALESTINE REFUGEES IN THE NEAR EAST (UNRWA)

Ambassador Ilter Türkmen, Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), reviews the achievements of the Agency and considers its future in light of recent developments in the Middle East. UNRWA has been assisting more than a million Palestine refugees since 1948, providing them with education, health-care, relief and social assistance, as well as income-generating programmes. The Agency will move its Vienna headquarters to Gaza and Amman and will continue its work until a final settlement is reached. Ambassador Türkmen confirms that the Israeli authorities hinder the movement of UNRWA personnel among the Palestinian territories and Jordan. Israel does not regard Palestinians working for UNRWA as United Nations Staff, and still holds 10 of them in Israeli jails.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

Undoubtedly, recent political arrangements reached by Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization, or the PLO, are concrete steps towards realizing peace between the Palestinians and the Israelis. But hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees continue to live in refugee camps in a number of Arab countries, and still depend on services and assistance provided by UNRWA, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.

Our guest today is the Commissioner-General of this important UN agency — Ambassador Ilter Türkmen. And joining me to talk with Ambassador Türkmen are Walter Pfaeffle of the Kuwait News Agency and Rym Brahimi of United Press International. Ambassador Türkmen, welcome to World Chronicle.

Ambassador Türkmen, most of us are familiar with the television images of refugees in Africa, and they live in terrible conditions. What are the conditions that UNRWA has established for the refugees in the Near East? I presume that they are considerably better than they are in Africa.

TÜRKMEN: But they were in the same situation in 1948-49, of course. Over the years they were living in tents, they had very little support; over the years their shelters have improved. They don't live —

LITTLEJOHNS: Do they still live in tents?

TÜRKMEN: No, no, no. They live in shelters, small houses. But, you see, they have gone through several crises, because there was of course the war of 1967, for instance, when they had again to go, to leave their country, to leave areas where they were living, and then they started again to live in tents, and then we reconstructed shelters. So it was a period of ups and downs for the Palestinians since 1949.

LITTLEJOHNS: Are there refugee villages, so to speak?

TÜRKMEN: There are refugee villages. You see, contrary to the generally prevailing view, all refugees don't live in camps; only one-third of them live in camps, the others live in cities —

LITTLEJOHNS: That's one third of about 3 million.

TÜRKMEN: 3 million, so 1 million will be living in camps and the others will live in cities, in villages.

LITTLEJOHNS: And UNRWA provides education, food rations, medical services; what else?

TÜRKMEN: What UNRWA provides is — we provide basic education, elementary education and preparatory education, nine or ten years, according to countries; we provide primary health care — we have our health centres, more than 110 health centres throughout the area; and we provide relief and social services to the poorest segment of the population, which is around 6 per cent of the total refugee population. Plus, of course, over the years, especially since the peace process has begun, we are now doing a lot of environmental work, constructing sewers; we have initiated an income generation programme; we have initiated family planning; we have increased the women's programme centres and centres for handicapped children. So the activities of UNRWA have expanded, and UNRWA has become more of a development-oriented agency.

PFAEFFLE: Ambassador Türkmen, the Palestinian people are known to be a very capable, very gifted, educated people; yet so many still live in refugee camps, have been for decades. How do you explain? Why can't they break out of these camps? You provide education for them, you make it possible for them to finish university. What is the real basic problem there? Why can't they get out of this refugee life?

TÜRKMEN: Well, you see, they don't stay all in camps. Some of them have been very successful. There were more than 400,000 Palestinians in the Gulf countries, most of them refugees, working there, earning good wages and sending remittances to their parents, but this now has come to an end, after the Gulf war. Many refugees have moved out of camps, but the population is increasing very rapidly. So on the one hand, some percentage of the refugees are moving out of camps, but the population in the camps remains stable or increases.

PFAEFFLE: Can I follow this up? The Iraqi occupation forced hundreds of thousands out of Kuwait, for instance. How did you cope with these refugees? I suppose some of them had Jordanian passports, but what about all the others?

TÜRKMEN: Most of them had Jordanian passports, and more than 350,000 came to Jordan, and of course the Jordan Government accepted all of them. And they, of course, created more demands for UNRWA services, more children in our schools, which we have met; these amounts we have met.

PFAEFFLE: At a time when you have much less money available, right?

TÜRKMEN: Well, it's not that we have less money, we don't have less money; the problem is that we cannot maintain the same level of services with the same amount of money because the population is increasing. So, in order to continue the same level of services, we need a steady increase of at least 5 per cent in our budget annually. This is the problem that we are facing, not that the governments are not maintaining their contributions.

BRAHIMI: Ambassador Türkmen, the peace process has changed, I think, a few things in your programme. You launched apparently a Peace Implementation Programme, but you're also moving to Gaza, the headquarters are leaving Vienna and moving to Gaza. Who made that decision? And could it be an indication that many countries would actually like to get rid of the refugee problem?

TÜRKMEN: No, because the idea behind moving to Gaza was an idea of political symbolism, to show the importance that the United Nations attaches to the economic and social development of West Bank and Gaza. And of course we will always say, well, the fact that we should give great emphasis to our programmes in the other countries — in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. As a matter of fact, when we move to Gaza, we will have two headquarters. One will be in Gaza and the other will be in Amman.

LITTLEJOHNS: Vienna will close down?

TÜRKMEN: Vienna will close down. Vienna will close down. But I don't think that it is connected in any way with an idea of dissolving, of doing away with UNRWA. I don't think that this is the policy of the governments at this stage.

BRAHIMI: It could look, though, like you're trying to focus more on the Gaza and West Bank refugees and less on the Lebanon or Syria ones.

TÜRKMEN: No....

BRAHIMI: In Jordan they're much, much, much better settled than they are in Lebanon, for instance.

TÜRKMEN: Well, of course, the political background is different in each country. In Jordan most of them are Jordanian citizens, so they benefit fully from government services. But the Jordanian Government also insists that we should continue to maintain our programmes in Jordan. Now, in Lebanon the situation is different. They don't have the nationality; you know that politically there is a problem with the Palestinians, with the presence of Palestinian refugees there because it affects the equilibrium between Muslims and Christians, between Shias and Sunnis. So each country is different. But we are not discriminating against our programmes in these countries, except the fact that as far as projects are concerned, as far as the Peace Implementation Programme is concerned, we receive more money for West Bank and Gaza. Because the project assistance is targeted, it is allocated for specific purposes, and we are spending much more in West Bank and Gaza at the present time.

BRAHIMI: May I just follow up on that? The Lebanese Government seems very much opposed to UNRWA's plans to improve the situation of the refugees there. Now, what is UNRWA trying to do about that? You were saying that the Lebanese aren't very warm about having Palestinians —

TÜRKMEN: Well, the problem in Lebanon, of course, is that they are very sensitive to anything which would look like the integration of refugees into the Lebanese society.

BRAHIMI: More so than in Syria or Jordan?

TÜRKMEN: More, yes, because of the political background, historical legacy, et cetera. But we always make the point that nothing in the programmes of UNRWA has any political motive. What we are trying to do is to help the refugees as long as they are there, as long as there is no solution to the refugee problem. What shape the solution to the refugee problem will take is not UNRWA's business. And we also point out that to improve the living conditions of refugees does not mean to integrate them. A refugee doesn't have to be poor, doesn't have to be miserable.

PFAEFFLE: Ambassador Türkmen, Michael spoke about the achievement of UNRWA, but I guess as journalists we're interested in the problems more than the achievements, and you mentioned a lot of problems in your remarks to the Advisory Commission.

TÜRKMEN: Yes.

PFAEFFLE: One of these problems is that you have difficulties in getting Israelis to agree to freedom of movement. Could you explain that a little more? And what will happen after the agreement is fully in place? I mean, after all, there is no Palestinian authority. Why would the Israelis interfere with the freedom of movement?

TÜRKMEN: Well, they control the entry and exit from Gaza, don't they?

PFAEFFLE: Yes, but also inside the territories you mentioned.

TÜRKMEN: Inside also, of course. Because there is the problem of movement between Jerusalem and West Bank and within the West Bank. Because of the violence which erupted after the peace process started, of course, the Israelis have become very security concerned. And one can understand, of course, their concern about security. But this has affected very much our operations. We had more than 200 days of closure of Gaza in one year, which has affected —

LITTLEJOHNS: Two hundred days of what, Ambassador?

TÜRKMEN: Of closures. Of closures. Which has limited the movement in and out of Gaza. But we hope that with the last agreement signed between the Palestinians and the Israelis, and with the establishment of the interim self government, things will improve. We hope so.

PFAEFFLE: How do you respond to the Israeli charge that UNRWA is a breeding ground for terrorists?

TÜRKMEN: They never made this charge. We never heard this charge.

PFAEFFLE: Well, we have heard it, heard them say it.

TÜRKMEN: Some individual may have expressed [that], but not the Government. The Government of Israel has officially expressed its appreciation for the role played by UNRWA and emphasized that UNRWA is very important for the interim period.

BRAHIMI: But then in the recent report of the Secretary-General on the working conditions of the staff, he does mention that UNRWA works under very, very harsh conditions. And one of the reasons is because of detentions by the Israeli Government, and such problems. Don't you have conflicts with the host country?

TÜRKMEN: We have some detained staff everywhere, not only there. We have some detained staff in other countries also from time to time. But the main problem is really the freedom of movement. You see, one reason we have difficulties is that, of course, most of our staff are Palestinians. We have 8,600 Palestinian staff in West Bank and Gaza. And the Israeli Government is not willing to consider these Palestinians as UN staff. So there's a problem of disagreement on principle in that respect. But we have to work out a modus operandi. For the moment, the situation is not very encouraging. We have difficulties in moving in and out of Gaza and the West Bank, and we have difficulties also between the West Bank and Jordan. The passage through Allenby Bridge has become much more complicated. So we are facing an ironical situation where there is more peace but more difficulties for us to operate.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is World Chronicle. Our guest is Ambassador Ilter Türkmen, Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. Ambassador Türkmen, I believe that for most of the period of UNRWA the Arab countries, or a number of the Arab countries, have not been contributing financially to UNRWA for various political reasons. Now that the peace process seems to be reasonably well underway, is there a possibility that that attitude might change?

TÜRKMEN: Well, that attitude has changed in certain respects. For instance, Saudi Arabia has given a grant of $20 million to UNRWA for certain projects in West Bank and Gaza. This was a turning point. But the contribution of the Gulf countries to our budget is minimal. It is 1 per cent of our budget. And this is the reason why I have suggested to the Secretary-General of the Arab League that he should make some efforts to bring this contribution to at least 3 per cent for 1996. I don't know if we will attain this objective. It's a minimal contribution.

LITTLEJOHNS: You mentioned that you need 5 per cent more annually, I think you said, because of the rising population of refugees. Is there any hope of getting that increase?

TÜRKMEN: Well, the level of contributions varies from one year to another; it varies with the policies of governments. For 1995, for instance, we were short of almost

$16 million, and we have balanced our budget by postponing the salary increases, which has created other problems, and we have introduced some austerity measures. So we will end up the year with probably $3 million to $4 million of a deficit, which, considering a budget of more than $320 million, is not so bad, is not so bad. But the problem with organizations like UNRWA is that, of course, they have no way of financing the deficit. We cannot print money, we cannot borrow money. And this is a problem, that we are eating up our operational reserve.

LITTLEJOHNS: The main contributor is the United States?

TÜRKMEN: The United States is the largest contributor, and the United States has been particularly generous during 1995. The total amount we received from the US has been $94 million.

PFAEFFLE: Ambassador, may I go back to this question of freedom of movement? The Israelis do make a distinction between Palestinians and non-Palestinian staff in your organization. Now, there must be a reason for them doing that, and it goes back to the security concerns they have. Over the years I've read the report, Israeli officials expressing concern about activities — well, you say the Israeli Government has never accused them of terrorism or this is a breeding ground for terrorism, but this is sort of what it indicates. What are you doing about it, to have the Palestinians accepted as equal?

TÜRKMEN: Well, they should have, of course, in principle what we call functional immunity while they are accomplishing their functions. But the Israelis are not ready to do that. Well, we are working out with the Israelis, we are going to have a discussion with them on what can be done to improve our working conditions. Because, you see, people have to move out of Gaza, between Gaza and West Bank, our staff. And when the headquarters go to Gaza, the headquarters staff will have to go not only to the West Bank, but they will have also to go to Jordan, Syria, and to Lebanon. And as things stand at the present time, it's impossible for the headquarters to function efficiently. And the General Assembly resolution requesting UNRWA to move its headquarters to Gaza has specifically indicated that this move should not negatively affect the operational efficiency of the Agency. So we have to find a modus operandi, as I said, with the Israelis. We are going to try to do that.

BRAHIMI: Yes, Mr. Türkmen, surely some of them have sympathies with either Arafat or Hamas or different political movements. Is UNRWA aware of any — in the past or in the present — of any activists who have been known?

TÜRKMEN: Of course they have their preferences, like all civil servants everywhere in the world. I mean, everybody in the UN has some preferences; I have some preferences as far as the political parties in Turkey are concerned. Of course they have their preferences, but this should not be a reason. But there has never been any serious act by

any UNRWA staff in the use of violence, never. There is no grounds really to suspect UNRWA staff, in suspecting UNRWA staff. They have proved that they are really internationally-minded. Of course, what they think about politics, how they are going to vote now — some are going to vote probably Hamas. This is not an important problem, since there is going to be a democratic system within the Palestinians. They can express their political preferences in this manner. But as long as they're UN staff they have to abide by the UN rules, and they should not openly indulge in political or other activity.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ambassador Türkmen, are there any UNRWA staff in prisons in the Israeli-occupied territories?

TÜRKMEN: There are still some.

LITTLEJOHNS: When you say some, you mean a fairly large number?

TÜRKMEN: I think there — the latest number I remember is around 10, I think.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ten, only 10?

TÜRKMEN: I don't know the exact figure.

LITTLEJOHNS: And what is being done to get them freed?

TÜRKMEN: Well, you see, the problem, when UN staff is detained, of course, we have to know the reasons for this detention, and this has always been a problem, that we don't know why. And then we have to go and be able to speak to them. This we are able to do. But we are never told why they are detained.

LITTLEJOHNS: So it couldn't be said that they're automatically political prisoners? I mean, they could have been responsible for some —

TÜRKMEN: We haven't been told what they have done.

LITTLEJOHNS: So they could have committed a felony, but you — the people who are incarcerating them are not telling you why.

TÜRKMEN: No.

BRAHIMI: Do their families have any benefits when they are detained and they stop working for a long period of time?

TÜRKMEN: They have.

BRAHIMI: Do they have UNRWA lawyers?

TÜRKMEN: They have, they have. We assist the families. We assisted also the families — you remember, when we had all these deportations to Lebanon, we assisted the families.

PFAEFFLE: Ambassador, a question about the PLO agreement. I guess a lot of people don't realize that most Palestinians are not even covered by this agreement. What kind of a problem does that present to you in the future? Does that breed a lot of — that must breed a lot of discontent among the Palestinians there, yes?

TÜRKMEN: This is an interim agreement, which has not dealt yet with certain problems. The refugee issue, for instance, will be negotiated at a later stage. The negotiations will start probably in May 1996. So this is an interim agreement regarding West Bank and Gaza. The other problems, the main problems — the settlements, Jerusalem, borders, the refugee problems — are to be negotiated in the permanent status agreement.

PFAEFFLE: But these are really the major problems, then.

TÜRKMEN: They are the major problems, but we are not involved in the negotiations.

BRAHIMI: Does UNRWA have a commitment to take care of the Palestine refugees until there's not one refugee left? Or how will that work out?

TÜRKMEN: It will depend on the countries, it will depend on the General Assembly. For the moment, we have been requested by the General Assembly to continue our activity, and the mandate of UNRWA is up for renewal again this year. It will be renewed — obviously, it will be renewed. What happens in three years' time, I don't know. If in the meantime the negotiations are successful and a political solution is found to the refugee problem, there's no reason why UNRWA should continue.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ambassador Türkmen, what would you say were the major achievements of UNRWA in the past 45 years?

TÜRKMEN: Well, I think that it has been an element of political and social stability, and it has given the Palestinians education and health services. Throughout these years the health standards have been extremely satisfactory.

LITTLEJOHNS: What is the life expectancy now? Do you have any idea?

TÜRKMEN: I don't have any idea. I don't have any idea. We don't have this statistic, I don't think so. But, I mean, many studies have indicated that the health programmes of UNRWA have helped the Palestinian population to maintain acceptable health standards even above the standards prevalent in the countries in which we operate. This is true also of education. We have been able to educate them. We have helped them to maintain — to keep their culture, to maintain their culture, and also their identity. Then we have, of course, had — the poorer Palestinians in particular, we provide them with relief. And we have initiated some programmes which were very useful for them, like environment, like women's programmes, like programmes for the handicapped, the Peace Implementation Programme. So I think that the record of the United Nations in this respect is extremely positive.

LITTLEJOHNS: You spoke about education. Surely it must be rather a politically sensitive issue to prepare the curricula for the schools in the camps, is it not? I mean, you have to be a little cautious about what you teach them, don't you?

TÜRKMEN: Well, we teach what is taught in the country in which we operate.

LITTLEJOHNS: And teachers come from all over the area?

TÜRKMEN: No, the teachers are the local teachers that we find. I mean, in Lebanon we use the teachers among the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon.

LITTLEJOHNS: And they're taught in Arabic or in English, or — ?

TÜRKMEN: In Arabic and English.

PFAEFFLE: Once they graduate, how difficult is it for them to find jobs, and where do they find jobs?

TÜRKMEN: Well, you see, I should mention that we have also eight vocational training centres. And we give also scholarships for universities to some 700 Palestinians per year. What they find — when they had the opportunity to go to the Gulf countries, they were finding a lot of jobs there. Now of course the situation is much more difficult. In Lebanon the unemployment rate is very high. It's very high in West Bank and Gaza, because most of the jobs were the jobs available in Israel, they were going and working in Israel, and the number of people who can go to Israel has been reduced tremendously.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ambassador Türkmen, I'm afraid I have to interrupt you there. That's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**.

Our guest has been Ambassador Ilter Türkmen, Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, or UNRWA. He was interviewed by Walter Pfaeffle of the Kuwait News Agency and Rym Brahimi of United Press International.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

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